

Embodied Capitalism and the Meth Economy

Jason Pine


The Body Reader: Essential Social and Cultural ...

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Introduction

This essay is about desire, compulsion, and bodies. It is my attempt to re-evoked the experiences of methamphetamine users, producers, and user-producers living in the rural midwestern United States and to make them uncanny. When something is uncanny, it has the effect of being both strange and familiar. But what do rural, severely marginalized, intoxicated people have in common with "us," the urban or suburban, the educated, adequately employed, and sufficiently sober, the "mainstream"? This essay argues that it is possible to trace the excesses and intensities lived by rural midwestern meth users and cooks to a broader field of forces felt in multiple worlds, affecting not only the "abject" rural poor but also enfranchised urbanites and many others.

An ordinary description or definition of this field of forces might include familiar but surprisingly opaque words like "capitalism," "neoliberalism," and "globalization." However, rather than making these forces conform to the language that at some point was decided could sufficiently capture them, this essay attempts to bring some of the forces into relief (Stewart 2007). To do this, it is necessary to track them in their manifold incarnations as materials and places, actions and sensibilities, and, most significantly, bodies. Accordingly, this story follows meth as a cultural value back to its earlier manufacture by "freedom-seeking" biker gangs and to its contemporary production in the recombination of rural Wal-Mart products. At Wal-Mart, it witnesses the way domestic spaces and bodies are built and destroyed, and from there it picks up on alternative consumer and worker ethics that circulate in other, "cosmopolitan" areas of the country and on that global space of encounter, the Internet. In these places, it peruses products like pomegranate juice, energy drinks, and Martha Stewart furnishings to gauge the forces of marketing, style, and cultural value. It follows shifts in sensibility across generations and moves along neuropsychological pathways to track the force of affect and its rerelease in specific forms of work and consumption. It finds, in the swipe of a food stamp debit card at the checkout line of Wal-Mart, and in mass thefts of copper wire from electrical substations, the pulse of government policy and the moral hazard of big business.

Employing some of the multisited ethnographic methods described by George E. Marcus (1995), this essay creates an assemblage of routes, places, materials, actions, and

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sensibilities to suggest that the distinctly marked and agitated bodies of rural midwestern methamphetamine users and producers are inseparable from and incomprehensible without the broader field of forces that make them possible. It draws on the idea that bodies experience the impact of global forces in their own spatiotemporal worlds (Harvey 2000). Despite a long history of scholarly interest in the body and an ever-increasing focus on the body in everyday practices (body modification, psychopharmacology, biogenetics), academic analysis and everyday experiences of embodiment have seldom been brought together. The following is an ethnographic exploration of a particular set of experiences that have been referred to as "embodied capitalism" (Tsianos and Papadopoulos 2006). It explores how the desire to consume can become a compulsion that tugs like the internalized demands of addiction. It also explores how the compulsion to work under precarious conditions gets transformed into a physiological and affective desire for self-realization and an elusive achievement called "freedom." In this story, the bodies of rural midwestern meth users and producers register most noticeably the impacts of some otherwise underemphasized changes occurring in the practices of work and consumption throughout the United States and globally.

Manifest Destiny

Wil lives in a camper in a five-acre clearing off a gravel road that runs through the dense woods of Versailles, a small town in south central Missouri. He, his wife, and two kids, aged six and eleven, packed into the camper a couple of months ago when their trailer burned down. "And the fire wasn't 'cause of a meth lab, but it easily coulda been," he laughed, bearing a missing tooth and his good nature. "It was the bad electric wiring." Talk of wiring brought into aural relief the steady hum of the generator that Wil had placed outside to feed us light and heat by way of a dangling, naked bulb and the glowing grill of a small space heater. The generator sat behind the camper under a makeshift ceiling of blue tarp that sheltered it from the relentless, chilly rain.

Things had been going well for Wil and his family for a long run. Until recently, he had had his own cement business, a brand new trailer, and some savings toward one of the houses he and his team were building. "I raised my first kid when I was fifteen . . . and I been doing concrete work ever since," he said. Eventually, the already dark afternoon turned into nightfall and Wil talked about the years when he hooked up with a cook in central Missouri and churned out a pound of crank per week. "Crank" is the name methamphetamine inherited from biker gangs, who for many years dominated the drug's production and distribution, transporting it in the crank cases of their motorcycles. Amphetamine had been the legal product of the pharmaceutical industry since the late 1930s, when Smith, Kline & French launched Benzedrine pills and inhalers, which the American Medical Association Council approved as a "pick-me-up" that would counter "certain depressive psychoactive conditions" with "a sense of increased energy or capacity for work, or a feeling of exhilaration" (Grinspoon and Hedblom 1975).² In the late 1960s, when the U.S. Justice Department began to scrutinize the



Figure 8.1. Trailer in South Central Missouri. Photo by Jason Pine.

extraordinarily high numbers associated with the manufacture, distribution, prescription, and sale of legal amphetamine, home-grown labs began proliferating. Then biker clubs, like Hell's Angels of Oakland, California, seized control of the market. The entrepreneurial coup of Hell's Angels is commonly attributed to its notorious leader, Sonny Barger, who transformed the club into an international organized crime organization. Significantly, despite his wild "gangster era" in which he "sold drugs and got into a lot of shit," Sonny was a media celebrity and widely esteemed as the quintessential "American rebel" (Sher and Marsden 2006, 40). Today, he is the unknown inspiration for scores of "weekend warriors."

"I was the man," Wil said, not without sarcasm. "I liked that no-one's-gonna-fuck-with-you-attitude." He explained,

A lot of my friends were . . . "biker types" . . . outlaws, most of them. That's what I grew up with. And for me not to be associated with them, I'd feel lost. . . . The image they got, I wanted . . . they come to me cause they knew I had it . . . and that made me feel like somebody.

Wil similarly described the sensation meth gave him when he smoked it: a surge of confidence that made him feel "amped up" and convinced he could do anything, whether physical or mental. Everybody was "happy and horny," he said. People wore their genitals

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raw after going at it for hours. No one desired food or had time to eat; there was too much talk and getting busy with sex or housework or fixing bikes. That was usually the case for the first two or three days. Then, "everything was tunnel vision . . . far away or . . . if I concentrated on something for a while, it seemed like I was in a cave." That was Wil's experience when he did long stretches of cement work. Once he saw people lurking outside his home where there was no one. Another time, at the height of a three-week smoking binge without food or sleep, he heard the voice of his dead brother. That was the time he almost died. His body, "smelling dead," lay immobile and emaciated on the trailer floor while his senses worked overtime: "your mind ain't all there," he said.

Methamphetamine is categorized as part of a complex class of compounds that, given the limitations of current research, is clumsily called "amphetamines" (Sulzer et al. 2005). Other members of this class are MDMA or ecstasy and khat, a shrub that is heavily cultivated in Yemen (Pantelis et al. 1989). Meth is made using the compound ephedrine, extracted from the herb ephedra, used in China for thousands of years. Amphetamines interact with the neuroreceptors that regulate dopamine, which has a near-"ubiquitous" role in the regulation of emotion or affect (2007). The release of dopamine increases blood pressure, mimicking what one feels when excited or afraid. While most amphetamines inhibit the reuptake of dopamine, methamphetamine is believed to have triple potency.³ Meth not only inhibits dopamine reuptake, but it also increases its release while, it is believed, inciting the synthesis of a new pool of dopamine available for nonreversed release. A chemist who studies rats on meth describes the drug's effects on dopamine transporters in the following layman's terms: "It's like turning a vacuum cleaner into a leaf blower."⁴

As a result, dopamine circulation is overactivated along the nigrostriatal pathway, which is associated with the coordination of motor movement. Lower amounts of amphetamine increase bodily locomotion and increasingly higher doses induce increasingly "constricted stereotypy" or "punding." Punding is the repetition of "nonspecific behavior" or the excessive iteration of the fragment of an action that is rendered meaningless in its abstraction (Rebec 1998, 517). If a rat is administered amphetamine, it chews off all the hair on its paws, bobs its head up and down, and repeatedly attempts to climb a single wall. Similarly, meth users engage in overcharged locomotor exploration, searching, and examining, but they also experience cognitive stereotypy that begins with intensified curiosity, progresses to suspiciousness, and culminates in paranoid delusions (Ellinwood, King, and Lee 2000).

This may explain why many meth users, in an act of "grooming," attempt to eliminate "meth mites" by frenetically picking at their skin or spraying it with Black Flag[®] to the point of laceration. It may also explain why meth users recount spending hours crouching behind blinded windows, within heating ducts, and atop trees, looking out for "meth monsters" (or the DEA). In Wil's case, a few disorienting experiences didn't change the fact that meth helped him work longer hours. It even enhanced his performance as a meth dealer:

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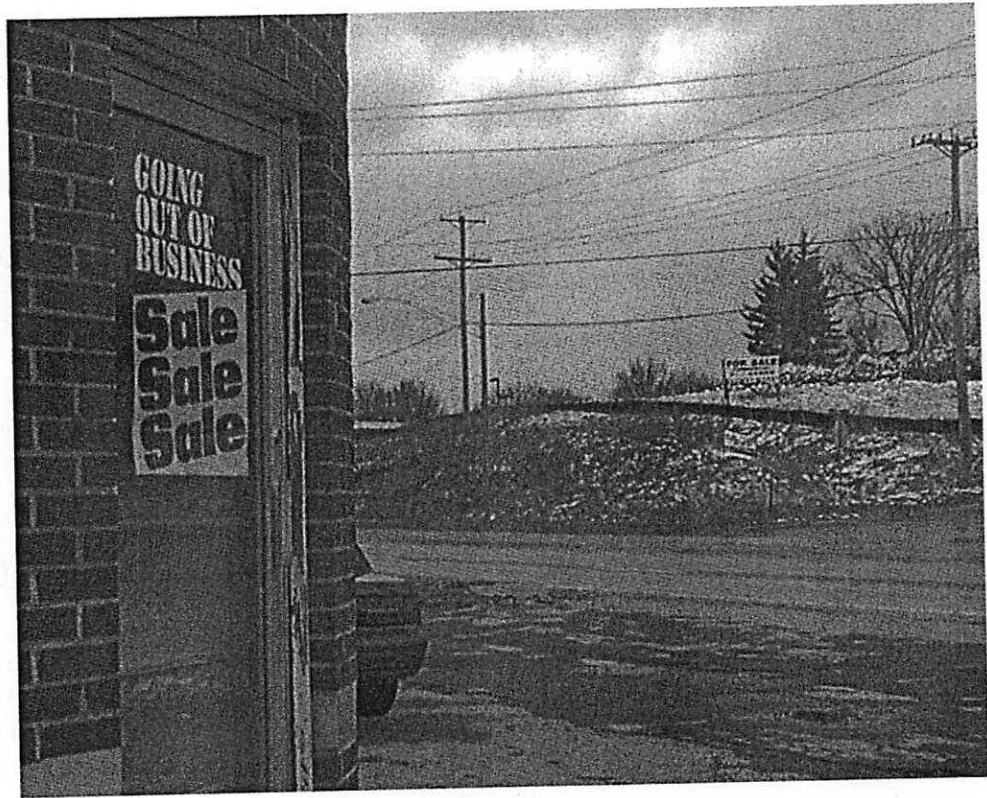


Figure 8.2. Depressed Town in Central Missouri. Photo by Jason Pine.

missing nothin'. You know what's going on, you know what's around you. It ain't paranoia, well I guess it can fall in a category of paranoia. But, you pretty much had your game together. You was always trying to be a step ahead of everything, and we stayed that way.

Wil took a swig from his 45-ounce Budweiser*. Many "blue collar" Missourians don't drink anything but the brew of their local St. Louis-headquartered Anheuser-Busch. In the small-town bars like Hammers, "Where the men get hammered and the women get nailed," according to the fifteen-dollar t-shirts they sell, or Snappers, where speed veterans encounter crack-smoking college kids, Amstel* Light is considered fancy and effeminate. Missourians know Bud and supported Busch because Busch supported them with six thousand jobs, generous pay, and good benefits, if you live in St. Louis. But Busch recently backed out of the bargain by agreeing to a takeover by the Belgian company InBev (Allen 2008). On the map since 1852, 1 Busch Place, like many other places caught up in "globalized America," will soon turn into a landmark of what once was.⁵

A related place sits just three miles up the Mississippi River, the park that sports the sparkling, stainless steel Gateway Arch. Standing on deep foundations higher than any other U.S. monument, the structure commemorates the explorers who led western

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expansion in what came to be known as the nation's Manifest Destiny. According to many architects, however, Eero Saarinen was not the best choice for designing the monument. They claimed that he "abetted a culture of planned obsolescence through the architectural equivalent of novel consumer goods" (Filler 2008). In fact, Saarinen was most prolific during the 1950s, when mass production had achieved its most spectacular form to date: the car as a common commodity. Saarinen, moreover, drafted many of his architectural designs, commissioned often by corporate clients, in his studio near the world center of the great automobile boom, Detroit, home of that model of productive stability called Ford Motors and that monumental colossus called General Motors, which proved to be another bargain buster, as demonstrated in Michael Moore's eulogy for the "blue collar" town of Flint, Michigan, *Roger and Me* (1989).

Fordism was the beginning of the end of St. Louis. With mass-produced cars came "car culture" and suburbanization. Moreover, with cars and suburbs came fast-food chains like MacDonalds, shipping giants like FedEx, and mega-retailers like Wal-Mart, fueling the mass consumption of everything, especially fuel (Fox 2004). In the 1970s, the oil crisis and the failing Fordist model of geographically fixed industrial production further spurred the "white flight" that left in its wake the new "inner city" (code word for poor people of color).

In Missouri, suburban housing development was not prolific enough to transform the expansive, sparsely populated rural tracts that make up the majority of the state. In fact, much of the state is arguably the victim of the "uneven geographic development" that is central to capitalist competition (Harvey 2000). Like a struggling tenant farmer, Wil pays a true landlord rent for parking his camper in that five-acre field, where the mute carcass of his burnt trailer also sits, the ambiguous evidence of a failed crop.

I've had some friends with families . . . and now they're homeless . . . a lot of it's family on my dad's side. . . . You ever heard of bathtub crank? . . . They made it too close to the furnace and the pilot light blew it up . . . lost two bedrooms, the bathroom and half the living room just making that shit. Weren't even there three weeks and lost pretty much everything they own.

There are others like Wil in Missouri and its surrounding states who engage in the risky practice of home meth production, destroying not only their homes but their bodies, most notably with third-degree burns. The choices they make have a lot to do with their desire for a better life. As the next sections will show, a better life has a lot to do with the notion of a new and improved self. First, however, it is important to look at the particularities of the rural midwestern context of meth production.

Home Is Where the Meth Is

Myself, the best thing I ever done is peanut butter crank. You use ephedrine, creamy peanut butter, sulfur . . . I'm telling you that's good meth . . . sticky . . . if you're a smoker, you can put it in a light bulb. . . . You can pretty much make it up in eight hours.

Many people like Wil in rural Missouri and neighboring Arkansas—high school educated or less, near the poverty line or lower, white and between the ages of thirty and seventy—produce and consume their social and economic worlds with local brew, indigenous crop, and home-made speed. Meth is as local as the Bud and marijuana; all the ingredients, except the farm fertilizer, can be found at Wal-Mart, whose headquarters is near the Arkansas border with Missouri. Many individuals in Wil's extended family are employed at the three Wal-Mart stores located in the central Missouri town of Columbia, whose population is under one hundred thousand. One of those stores is a Wal-Mart SuperCenter, a complete consumer ecology providing everything one would find in a supermarket, along with all of life's everyday goods, and even some luxury items.

You take the light bulb . . . you bust this end off it right here and knock it down inside. You clean all this white shit out—this white shit in here will kill you . . . and so you take salt and dump it down in there and you shake this around and the salt takes all that white off. . . . I take a clothes hanger, heat it up, take a torch and heat this bulb up and push it in and then pop a hole in it . . . and then you can actually hit off the bulb itself . . . put your shit down inside there and it goes around like a tornado . . . that's how I did mine . . . that or tinfoil . . . tinfoil's a toxin . . . your shiny side is your toxin . . . if you cook off that, it puts toxins on your food or anything else . . . you gotta turn it around the other way.

Creamy peanut butter, straws, tinfoil, light bulbs, and wire hangers—some might claim that Wal-Mart, the original behemoth of retailing, by employing, feeding, and composing the living environments of Missourians like Wil, has utterly, irrevocably hailed them in "embodied capitalism" (Tsianos and Papadopoulos 2006). According to this logic, individuals not only perform the specific tasks of unloading inventory, stocking shelves, or cashiering during their documented work hours at Wal-Mart or Annheiser-Busch; they, all of us, are constantly performing the "immaterial labor" of ordinary, everyday consuming and marketing. That is, we help define "fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion" (Lazzarato 1996). The occult manner in which Wil consumes Wal-Mart products helps create cultural norms while lending those products a surplus value that only other meth producer-consumers appreciate. Lightbulbs, tinfoil, matchbooks, coffee filters, break fluid, paint thinner, Dr. Pepper™, and Mountain Dew™ become laden with occult subcultural meaning and value.⁶

Embodied capitalism also means that all of us, from manual laborers to managers and everyone in between, are increasingly expected to tap into our own embodied resources, such as decision-making intelligence and personality (*are you a team player?*). Post-Fordism is marked not only by the dissolution of centralized industrial production and the growing necessity that competitive corporations engage in multinational synergies of the kind belatedly embraced by Annheiser-Busch. It also means weakened labor unions and the "neoliberal" abandonment of social welfare, in a perverse renaissance of the American dream, where "challenge is opportunity" and "opportunity" is "responsibility."⁷ Most profoundly, however, the contemporary economy

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constitutes a significant upheaval in everyday experience, where the way you think and feel are assessed as "productive" or discarded as nonproductive. These invasions of the body, some argue, push it to the point of "precarity" (Tsianos and Papadopoulos 2006; Lazzarato 1996).

I had to use it to go to work . . . we stayed up for . . . I'd say a month and a half straight. I had six ounces of that shit. The rest of my guys they were always tweaked out. I'd wrap it up in Wonder Bread, in a ball, and put a bunch of them in a sandwich bag, in a cooler, or in Twinkies. . . . I had to have it for work. . . . Once you're away from it for a couple of hours, your body starts breaking down. . . . And I got sick . . . so I left that shit alone, trying to get better, but I kept smelling dead. . . . Smell like anhydrous basically, but it was a death smell. . . . I was laying on the ground for two weeks and coughing . . . and then next thing I know, I wake up the next morning and I'm ready to run a hundred miles. . . . My mom shows up to take me to the hospital, but we end up going shopping at Wal-Mart.

Wonder Bread, Twinkies, sandwich bags, and a cooler—perfect for integrating meth with working concrete. "I think a lot of people think that they gotta have it to focus, do good . . . me, I *thought* I did," Wil said, taking another swig from his 45-ounce Bud. Many meth producer-consumers in Missouri and Arkansas say similar things about meth consumption and work. Forty-four-year-old truck driver Jimmy of Heber Springs, Arkansas, says,

Twenty years ago, it was as easy to get it as walking into Wal-Mart and buying a pack a gum. You could pull into any truck stop anywhere and say, "I'm looking for road dope" and you'd have a dozen people say, "What kind you want? I'm over here! I'm over here!" . . . I mean, if you *didn't* do it, you was an oddball.

Jimmy adds that hitting meth is "like putting rocket fuel in a Volkswagon." Randy, despite the fatigue from chemo and metastasizing throat cancer, says his home-cooked meth gave him the "jump start" and the "dough" he needed to build a new deck on his two-room house in Cedar Hill, Missouri. Twenty-two-year-old Calvin, sitting in a jail cell in Heber Springs, Arkansas, with an extra ten years of wrinkles and blemishes, says he didn't want to go to work at the factory unless he had it in his pocket. His cellmate, pockmarked and sallow thirty-year-old Henry, says he never wanted to go to work if he had it. Both of them agree that when they get out, they'll be "hittin' that coffeepot from now on." An inestimable number of meth cooks and/or users in the rural Midwest have found meth at the intersection of work and everyday consumption, as did Wil when he worked concrete:

I mean I ate a lot a Twinkies, let me tell you, when I was doing my thing . . . those guys, when they see me eat a Twinkie they knew mud was coming or that I was getting tired. They come running up to the truck, "Where's my Twinkie?" . . . They all used, but one.

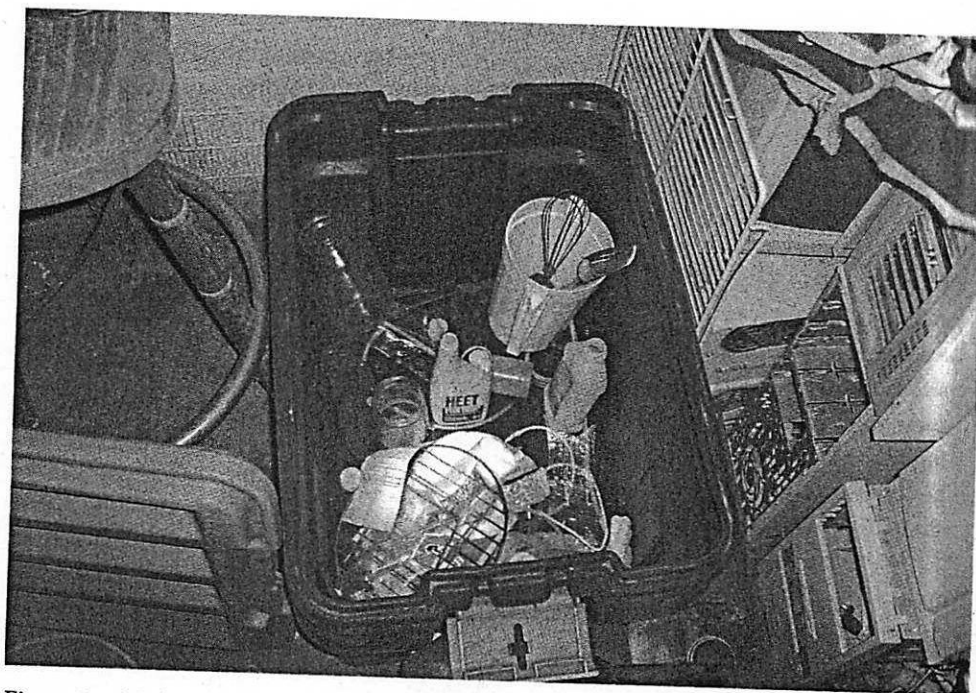


Figure 8.3. Meth Lab. Photo courtesy of Polk County, Arkansas, Sheriff's Office.

Like Wil, rural Missourians and Arkansans were dependent on local "natural" resources if they wanted to get high, make dope, or turn dope into money. Meth recipes proliferated as "mom and pop" labs sprouted and exploded in record numbers. A veritable middle-American cottage industry materialized and combusted using Wal-Mart arcana: Liquid Draino, antifreeze, radiator fluid, lithium strips from batteries, Black Flag, Solarcaine, inhalers, fish aquarium charcoal, red phosphorous from old TV sets, and, not least of them all, Sudafed. The traditional rural occupation of farming provided the additional resources, including medicated salt lick, chicken feed, and farm fertilizer. "We used to sit in the parking lot of Wal-Mart for training and see how many of 'em we could pick out," a narc says.

When federal restrictions on the sale of cold medicine containing pseudoephedrine significantly reduced home meth production starting in 2005, the rural Midwest (and many other rural regions of the United States) got ensnared in an elaborate web of global production and distribution networks. Now the product comes from somewhere else. "What we're into now is a whole other ball of wax," says one Arkansas Drug Task Force agent, "Now people disappear so quickly in this trade and then become someone else overnight." He and his partners have traced the trail to "Latinos" who import it from Mexico to Dallas, and "Asians" from the north of Texas who bring it up to Arkansas.⁸ "They're filling the void with a new product: crystal meth and ice. . . . And nine times outta ten, they don't use dope. They're businessmen." The effects of "globalized America" are now registered in the rural Midwest meth economy, as local manufacture is displaced by new players, new networks, new modes

of production to the Mexican amphetamine stamp on it,

According to people in the drug trade, it's harder to explain the increase when it was a Narcotics agent in Fort Smith: "Incidences are closer" or "easier."

If they're "trash" or "junk," he has said the drug trade has drawn the line between derpublicizing the second crack users.

According to people don't like he world meth labs are used as late



of production and a new, "foreign" product. The Wal-Mart SuperCenter is yielding to the Mexican superlab, which puts out pounds upon pounds of high-grade methamphetamine with, on average, 98 percent purity. "That's a lot of product after you stomp on it, and more addictive when you don't."⁹

According to narcotics agents in Polk County, Arkansas, the younger generations, people in their teens and twenties, want the "pain pills"—Oxycontin, Zanax, and Hydrocodone.¹⁰ "That's gold to them. Their parents don't smell it like they do marijuana. It's harder to detect and easier to transport." The Arkansas Drug Task Force agents explained that the younger generations didn't want to have anything to do with meth when it was that dirty crank, unless at an early age they were fed it by their elders. Narcotics agents working in Arkansas towns like Heber Springs, Middlebaster, and Fort Smith and in Missouri towns like Cedar Hill, Morse Mill, and Columbia recount incidences of adult users who blow meth smoke into their children's mouths "to be closer" or even force them to drink sulfuric acid when they don't shut up.¹¹

If they're not that close to it, the younger generations consider crank a "white trash" or "hillbilly" drug. College students at the University of Missouri-Columbia have said they will drink and use marijuana, mushrooms, acid, and cocaine, but they draw the line at meth. They say they will even use crack cocaine, repeating the underpublicized drug consumption patterns reported during the "inner-city epidemic" of the second half of the 1980s, when the number of middle- and upper-class white crack users may have actually exceeded the total of nonwhite "inner-city" users.

According to Arkansas Drug Task Force agents, "it's all about marketing." Young people don't want a drug that "comes from a filthy trailer owned by a guy who looks like he works in a carnival, puts meth in his Dr. Pepper and drinks it." Narcs say rural meth labs are usually indescribably foul. They find excrement on the floors, buckets used as latrines, piles of dirty diapers, uncapped needles on the couch, porn, red-

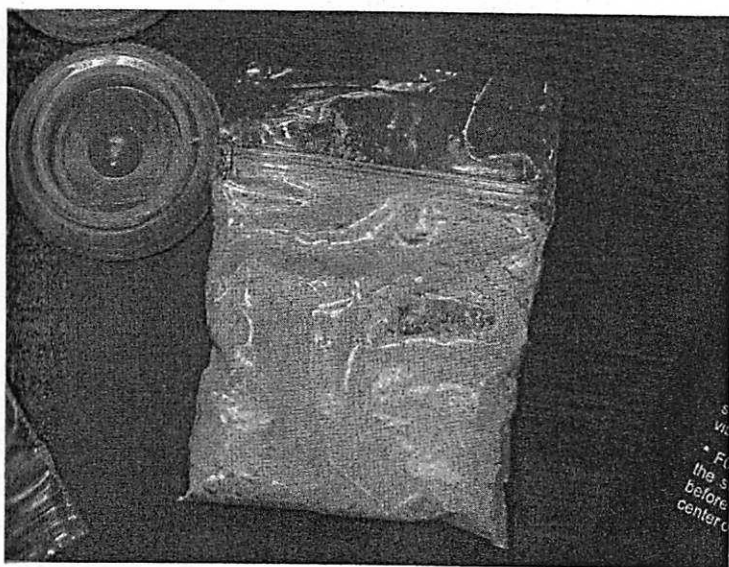


Figure 8.4. Crank.
Photo by Jason Pine.

rusted guns, and all the oxidizing chemicals and run-off littering the counters, the kitchen table, and the coffee table. Homemade meth is an unwashed product that, as Wil puts it, "has the color of Mississippi mud water" (or creamy peanut butter). To young rural Arkansas and Missouri drug users, meth bares its own *déclassé* origins: the underskilled labor of its users (bathtub crank), the values of their "blue collar" vocations (road dope), and the banality of their unreflexive everyday consumerism (Wal-Mart).

I lost thirty pounds in a matter of no time and I'm only a buck fifty. . . . I didn't eat and what I did eat had meth in it—Twinkies, bread. I was getting my food and my high all at once. . . . It rots your guts out . . . if you snort it, it tears your cartilage up in your nose . . . or makes your nose fall off . . . rots your teeth, and kills many, many brain cells. I wish I had all the brain cells I killed. I probably wouldn't be living in this camper.

An analogue to the desire and compulsion of meth addiction traceable in Wil's account can be found in chapter 32 of Hell's Angel Sonny Barger's self-help book, *Freedom: Credo from the Road* (2005). Entitled "Find Your Speed, Maintain Velocity, Keep on Doing It," this particular "credo" aptly captures the lethal redundancy implied in the self-destructive stereotypy that a meth-addicted body and, by extension, a stereotyped poor, rural midwesterner, performs. It is like "spinning your wheels" without going anywhere specific, just "on the road." In the introduction to his book, Barger calls this "freedom":

The first motorcycle ride I took changed my life forever. So did serving a long-term sentence in Folsom. . . . I liked motorcycles because they were all you and nothing else. You could go as fast and far as you wanted. It was freedom all right. . . . I find jail, and especially prison, an all-American experience. Both the people who run the prisons and the inmates who are in there create their own little America, except it's an America with a much more intense set of rules, values, pecking order, privileges, routine, and punishments. . . . You have to be . . . committed to the principle of getting through life one day at a time. As a result of this system, prison gave me an invaluable perspective on freedom and survival. (Barger et al. 2005, 8–10)

When looked at within the broader field of forces animating U.S. cultural-economic life, Barger's credo reveals that the Baby Boomer (born between 1946 and 1964) is an embodied anachronism. This is because "freedom"-seeking as an end in itself, without planning for the future, is increasingly regarded as immoral, even un-American.¹² This is especially the case from the perspective of Generation Y (born between 1978 and 1992). Before taking a look at this newly active Gen Y, it is necessary to place this population in context. Barger's words demonstrate that the desire and compulsion of meth addiction and the cultural-economic world it symbolizes are linked to a more widespread sensibility that extends far beyond the rural Midwest. That sensibility is embodied by the "fast subject" (Thrift 2000) and the context that sustains and is sustained by this sensibility is the "new economy."

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The New Alchemy

The arrival of crystal meth in rural Missouri and Arkansas has changed younger drug users' tastes. This new and improved product comes in the form of small clear or white shards. It is more palatable and appears less harmful. "It's clinical. And all you do is breathe in the white vapor. It's easier than smoking a cigarette." Home-cooked meth, on the other hand, is like the "moonshine of the 21st century" (Simpson 2006, 1). It recalls a "passé" form of rural poverty. Rather than market-ready moveable folkloric value, it embodies recalcitrance. This is the case because "the rural" underwent an inversion produced by the mainstreamed DIY aesthetic that began with Urban Outfitters and has culminated in Martha Stewart's tenth property, the \$15-million, 153-acre, eighteenth-century Cantitoe Farm in Bedford, New York. "It's the farm as art," says Allan Greenberg, the architect she hired to restore it (Rozhon 2002).

Crystal meth is a product of the new alchemy. The naïve art of making do with whatever is at hand (or at Wal-Mart) is no match for it. Peanut butter crank is unrefined and insufficiently aestheticized; it bares its own constituent substances, the everyday household products that articulate a "middle American" body (inorganic and obese).¹³ Crystal, on the other hand, like Smartwater™ or P©Mx and many other products found at Whole Foods, promises a different kind of embodiment, that of the "educated consumer."¹⁴ Moreover, the new alchemy has helped redefine "middle-class" consumer products as the new "generic" (stigmatized, yet WIC approved). Meanwhile, Wal-Mart encourages its employees to apply for food stamps (because they qualify) and to spend their monthly benefit at Wal-Mart.¹⁵

In the "new economy," the origins of a product are effaced. The "fair trade" logo, for example, will signify that a banana originates not only in "approved" labor and environmental practices in Ecuador but also in concerned "fair trade" publics in Europe and the United States. Products take on as much cultural value as material value, if not more (Lash and Urry 1994). This happens when active consumers become hyperactive "voicy consumers" capable of subversion and resistance and get invited by manufacturers, designers, and marketers "to criticize, share their feelings and to interact with other consumers" (Callon 200).

Generation Y

Generation Y is the cohort born between 1978 and 1992 who are currently coming of age in the workforce. The blog *YPulse*, a youth marketing resource featured in publications such as *Forbes* and *Fast Company*, defines Gen Y by contrasting them to Gen X (born between 1965 and 1977). According to the "Youth Marketing Mega Event Conference Day One & Two Dispatch," Gen Xers are summed up by a "decaying world" of divorce, "AIDS, gangs and violence." They are "pessimistic, realistic, and nostalgic for stability" and "recycle trends, clothes styles . . . and fell [sic] there is no guarantee in finding happiness and success." The members of Gen Y, on the other hand,

- Believe they can do things on their own—starting their own business at 15, want to be famous because they think that they can because of shows like “American Idol”
- They are individuals, hopeful, entrepreneurs, optimistic, and “smarter than you.”
- Extremely STRESSED generation
- They are also extremely hard to manage because they strive for so much.

YPulse gives its description of the younger generation in, above all, an economic register. It depicts an entrepreneurial personality. They are “optimistic,” believe in their own potential, and “strive for so much.” They are perpetually productive, but more than anything, they are perpetually producing themselves. They are what Nigel Thrift (2000) calls “fast subjects” who are “maximally creative.” Unlike Gen Xers, Gen Yers do not see a “decaying” but rather a “faster and more uncertain world, one in which all advantage is temporary” (Thrift 2000, 676). They see a thrilling state of emergency rife with opportunities for self-fashioning, self-mastery, and the embodiment of success. They embody the core sensibility of the new capitalist economy.

“They’re extremists, hard drivers, workaholics. . . . With an all-or-nothing personality and a history of drug experimentation, you’ve got a formula for disaster when this person tries crack,” the director of the Cocaine Abuse Treatment Program at Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center said of the “upwardly mobile” crack user in 1989 (Elmer-DeWitt, Beaty, and Harbison 1989). Twenty years later, the etiology of crystal meth use is not as self-evident. This is largely due, perhaps, to the fact that, when ingested, methamphetamine has a half-life up to fourteen times greater than that of cocaine. With meth, you’ve got a formula for deferred disaster, a formula discernable on the molecular level. In a recent study (Knutson et al. 2003), a group of scientists tracked the effects of amphetamine on “neural and affective responses to incentives” measured in dopamine levels. The incentive they used was money. The participants in the study were first shown the money, administered moderate amounts of amphetamine, and instructed to play a game not unlike casino gambling. The researchers’ findings were that, contrary to the ordinary distinction between the excitement caused by the anticipation of gain and that caused by the anticipation of loss, amphetamines may regulate dopamine levels to aid in reframing potential losses as the potential *avoidance* of losses. In other words, amphetamine users are able to see “opportunities” to evade risk where nonusers ordinarily see, quite simply, risk.

Edgework

Put another way, the “fast subjects” of Gen Y are the embodiment of their own “edgework.” “Edgework” is the term scholars use to describe risk-taking practices that bring the body to states of nervousness, fear, excitement, and exhilaration (Lyng 2004). As people approach the edge, “their perceptual field becomes highly focused: background factors recede from view,” and their world is redefined according to “only

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those factors that immediately determine success or failure in negotiating the edge" (Lyng 2004, 24; Lyng 1990, 861-62).

For older generations and for many "undereducated" Gen Yers without a sense of opportunity-responsibility, meth performs the edgework for them. Its power to saturate the brain with unprecedented quantities of dopamine for the duration of an extraordinarily long half-life elongates time and redraws space "exclusively in terms of the event" (Milovanovic 2003, 122). It produces a heightened, eternal present, a hyperreality. Wil calls it "tunnel vision." Danny, a forty-year-old Austin meth dealer, calls it "TST: Tina Standard Time."¹⁶

The edgework performed by meth users, Gen Yers, and Gen Yers who use meth is perhaps the quintessential form of immaterial labor that fuels embodied capitalism. If your body is excited, "STRESSED," and "hard to manage," you are living, embodied proof that, in the words of neoliberals, "free people govern themselves."¹⁷ Meth users, in fact, feel a sense of supreme self-realized sovereignty. "I felt like I was superior to society, that I was invincible because I had gotten away with so much. I would walk into a store and take what I wanted like I owned it," says 33-year-old Tim of the southern Illinois town of Quincy. "My best friend got fired from her job while buying, using register money, but she didn't believe she was fired and kept showing up," says Tiffany, a 25-year-old middle-class user in Austin. "What's mine is mine and what's yours is mine," says Heather, her 28-year-old friend, summing up the ethos of not only meth-motivated shoplifting, burglary, mugging, and identity theft but also large-scale corporate profiteering and fraud at a rising number of "underregulated" financial institutions from WorldCom (WCOM) and Enron (ENE) to Martha Stewart (MSO), and from Lehman Brothers (LEH) to Bernie Madoff (LLC).¹⁸

Methamphetamine's edgework summons the specialized decision-making intelligence of "extremists" and "hard drivers" who are "smarter than you," feel "optimistic," and "believe they can do things on their own," as *YPulse* describes today's most "active" generation. Methwork increases the value of fast action by redefining its worst consequences as exciting opportunities. "I was just as addicted to that 'Mission Impossible' feeling, crawling on my belly for hundreds of yards to steal that anhydrous ammonia," says Tim of Illinois. Police in rural areas across the country, in fact, have reported unusual spikes in meth-related crime. In California's Central Valley, the Agricultural Crime Technology Information and Operations Network reported a 400-percent increase in thefts in 2006. Most of the thefts were of the copper wires that carry power to irrigation systems. When a mine collapse in Indonesia, a worker strike in Chile, and the demand for industrializing metals by what investors call "emerging Asia" more than quintupled the value of copper on the London Metals Market, it is alleged that meth users began stealing it and selling it to scrap metal dealers and recyclers. It is as if, in a furious sweep of farms, electrical substations, and cellular telephone towers from California to Minnesota and from Texas to Maine, meth users are stripping bare the material foundation of U.S. industrialization (Clark 2007). Methwork is not unlike the financial markets in which it is embedded. In fact, meth's edgework, trading ruin for ruin and undoing decades of economic stability for the mainstream, precisely mirrors Bear Stearns's just-in-time hedge fund bets on

subprime mortgages on the credit default swap (CDS) market, where debt is traded and coveted as if it were equity.¹⁹ From the drugs to high finance, it's edgework, inciting a renewed War on Drugs and courting what federal regulators currently call the "moral hazard" of excessive risk (Leavitt 2008, A19).

Despite the uncertainties of contemporary cultural economic well-being, "the American people" are still bound by the "Contract with America" of 1994. The contract, according to Newt.org, offers a "national renewal, a written commitment with no fine print."²⁰ Indeed, the document prominently includes the Personal Responsibility Act, which entailed the drastic reduction of social welfare spending. The result is a "nonprotectionist" political economy that does not anticipate periods when a person becomes nonproductive due to accident, illness, unemployment, or age (Tsianos and Papadopoulos 2006). The future not only is not guaranteed; it is "already appropriated in the present" (ibid.). This presentist sensibility, where "all advantage is temporary" (Thrift 2000), is how capitalism feels when it is embodied. It is the embodied political-economic condition called "precarity" (Lazzarato 1996). The contemporary cultural economy, like meth, incites bodies to approach the edge, fired with the focused agility to keep a footing on the "boundary line between two physical or mental states" (Milovanovic 2003, 122). For meth bodies and the kinds of bodies produced in the new economy, risk is reward and states of nervousness and exhilaration feel like personal accomplishment, self-determination, omnipotence, and freedom (Lyng 2004).

Bodies and Precarious Renewal

The kinetics of meth and the new economy within and between bodies perhaps explains the fecundity of the broader market of crystal meth consumption that extends well beyond rural Arkansas and Missouri to a multitude of cities, suburbs, and cultural economic worlds across the United States. Take, for example, Paul, a white male in his midforties who owns with his boyfriend two new cars and a \$300,000 two-bedroom home in central Austin, Texas. For him, the productive force of crystal meth gives him the embodiment of a Gen Yer:

Young people don't use crystal . . . they don't need it . . . crystal is to regain your youth. It's needing help to stay up. Who am I gonna meet tonight? What kind of trouble can I get into? The adrenaline rush of a 25-year-old, the adrenaline rush of just life, is easy for them, you reach thirty, thirty-five, forty, forty-five, and life has become boring, to be quite honest. Gay men do not have kids to keep them young. How can I be young again? The easiest way is to find someone who has crystal meth and find a pipe and you're young again in five minutes. It's the lazy man's way to a midlife crisis.

Paul, like many others across the United States, from Orange County to Midtown Manhattan, describe their crystal meth use as an act of life renewal concretized in

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sex, work, sex work, housework, drug dealing, and even dissertation writing. In 2006, the federal antimeth sweep called Operation Red Fusion landed multiple Manhattan crystal meth lab busts. One arrest was of a Fulbright scholar in Columbia University's Department of History, who stated that he cooked and used crystal meth "to boost his studying" (Venezia, Martinez, and Cohen 2006). Also arrested was a vice-president of information technology at Citigroup, who cooked crystal meth in his \$6,000-a-month penthouse because he couldn't find a reliable source since moving from Seattle (ibid.). "I was a million-dollar salesperson. When I was high, I could run circles around my coworkers," says Julie, a forty-year-old mother at Drug Court in Dallas. Forty-five-year-old Joey in Austin says it makes multitasking a breeze and every task more enjoyable, from cleaning the baseboards and ceiling fans to holding twelve simultaneous chat sessions on Men4Men4Sex.com and Men4SexNow.com. In the age of the digital self, the dating profile "is really a résumé" that "never sleeps. It keeps vigil day and night, dutifully holding your place in the queue of romantic prospects drummed up by the thousands of searches all over the world whose criteria you happen to meet" (Egan 2003).

Conclusion

Methamphetamine, although popular among people from a wide range of cultural-economic worlds of the United States, is not the only available resource for the kinds of productivity Wil or Julie or Paul sought. Meth is only one product within a wider narco-capitalist system that includes an array of performance enhancers, from ADHD medications (Pine 2007) to steroids to the self-help industry, systematically yielding "belabored bodies" (McGee 2007). For the fast mainstream, making it in embodied capitalism means feeling like a Monster™, Rockstar™, or a Red Bull™ and taking it Full Throttle™ down to the Redline™, or simply taking cocaine, ice, or meth.²¹ For Generation Y, it is the opportunity not to become a "brand ambassador" but to develop one's "own inner brand." In embodied capitalism, bodies, and not just those of meth users, are at once fuel and machine, resource and product, point of departure and the obstacle. They register the exertion of immaterial labor and the symptoms of precarity. Overtweaked, they bear the marks of their own edgework. When a body does not register anything anymore and is incapable of being affected, it is dead (Latour 2004). Or, does it register the ultimate intensity, that of dying? Even dying meth users risk redundancy. Their pockmarked faces, softened black teeth, and yellowed hair are already becoming the disembodied signifiers of *True Lives* requiring *Intervention*.²²

This essay has used ethnography to track embodied capitalism as a sensibility registered, in varying ways, in bodies in the rural Midwest and throughout the United States. Embodied capitalism is a relatively new concept that, paradoxically, has only been examined as an abstraction. This story has attempted to anchor it in the particularity of places and bodies, and to flesh out one of the ways embodied capitalism feels.

NOTES

I would like to thank my many inspiring colleagues at Purchase College, particularly Mary Kosut and Lisa Jean Moore, for their careful, multiple readings of this essay. Thanks also to Daniel Miller, Jeff Sikes, Katie Stewart, Mishka Terplan, and, most of all, the many individuals who agreed to participate in this research. Some have successfully managed their addictions, but many, sadly, have not.

1. Methamphetamine is part of a class of drugs called amphetamine.
2. The authors cite the AMA Council on Pharmacy and Chemistry, "Present status of Benzadrine sulfate," p. 2069.
3. Sulzer (2005) notes that existing evidence that meth affects dopamine synthesis is inconclusive.
4. Personal interview with Dennis K. Miller, Department of Psychological Services, University of Missouri, Columbia, April 2005.
5. See <http://www.savebudweiser.com/> for employee concerns about "jobs going overseas."
6. Rural meth users covet these for their high sugar and caffeine content.
7. The 2006 *American Dream Initiative* states, "Each of us should have the opportunity to live up to our God-given potential, and the responsibility to make the most of it. In America, anyone willing to work for it deserves the chance to get ahead." The fourth bullet point in a section entitled "New Opportunity Agenda" reads, "Every individual should have the opportunity and responsibility to start building wealth from day one, and the security and community that come from owning a home." http://www.dlc.org/ndol_ci.cfm?kaid=86&subid=194&contentid=253993 (accessed October 12, 2008).
8. Although California is considered to be a possible origin of "imported" methamphetamine, mention of Mexico preserves the familiar meter of the "war on drugs" and immigration.
9. "Stomping on" a drug means cutting it with another substance (baking soda, laxatives, Vitamin B).
10. Xanax is for anxiety disorders, not pain.
11. The mother told Drug Task Force agents she used sulfuric acid for cleaning drains, but her six-year-old accidentally drank it. Unexpectedly, months later, the child partially regained his voice and told police his mother had forced him to drink it (personal interview with Tim Williamson, prosecutor for the 8th West Judicial District, and Officer Mike May, Mount Ida, Arizona, June 2006).
12. See note 5.
13. Townsend (1979) factors in "social exclusion" when assessing rural poverty, stating that people "can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities, and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or at least widely encouraged or approved, in the societies to which they belong" (31).
14. From Smartwater: "side effects may include being called nerd, dork, geek, brainiac, know-it-all, smarty-pants, smart alek, bookworm, egghead, four-eyes, Einstein or being mistaken for the I.T. guy." <http://bottledwaterstore.com/smartwater.htm>. Research that P@M conducted in 2001 found that only 12 percent of the (U.S.) population knew what pomegranates were, let alone their antioxidant quality. <http://www.healthybuzz.com/>.
15. Featherstone (2004). "Wal-Mart takes out ads in [the] local paper the same day the community's poorest citizens collect their welfare checks."
16. Meth is called "Tina" among gay male users.

17. "Like Lincoln, right, as God give of scandal and dis-selves." <http://new>

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17. "Like Lincoln, our first Republican president, we intend to act with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right. To restore accountability to Congress. To end its cycle of scandal and disgrace. To make us all proud again of the way free people govern themselves." [Http://newt.org/AboutNewt/FAQs/ContractwithAmerica/tabid/186/Default.aspx](http://newt.org/AboutNewt/FAQs/ContractwithAmerica/tabid/186/Default.aspx).

18. Bernard L. Madoff Investment Securities LLC was a private company through which, arguably, several institutions courted moral hazard, including New York University, which lost \$24 million. Todd Henderson, Moral hazard and credit derivatives. University of Chicago Law School. Available at http://s.wsj.net/public/resources/documents/st_madoff_victims_20081215.html. Accessed September 27, 2006.

19. [Http://uchicagolaw.typepad.com/faculty/2006/09/moral_hazard_an.html](http://uchicagolaw.typepad.com/faculty/2006/09/moral_hazard_an.html).

20. [Http://newt.org/AboutNewt/FAQs/ContractwithAmerica/tabid/186/Default.aspx](http://newt.org/AboutNewt/FAQs/ContractwithAmerica/tabid/186/Default.aspx).

21. Energy drinks.

22. Television programs that have showcased meth addiction.

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